

## **United States Offices in China**

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The US presence in China at the end of the last century and the beginning of this century is well documented. China was a common missionary station, attracting many US nationals. Adventurers, seamen, “Yankee” traders, and ambassadors and their entourages all migrated to China in the hopes of benefiting from trade with the newly “opened” China.

During this period, China fought a number of wars (e.g., the Sino-French War of 1885 and the Opium Wars) with western powers and Japan, all of which resulted ultimately in the defeat of China. In part as retribution for the cost of these wars these foreign powers were able to demand concessions from China. These concessions oftentimes were presented as being in the best interest of China or as modernizing China. Under this guise, railroads were built, loans approved, areas leased, reduced land tariffs coerced, rights of local jurisdiction and police power imposed and mining exploration authorized. A great power rivalry ensued with Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Japan and the United States all seeking to acquire and exercise control over various “spheres of influence”.

This heady atmosphere plus a series of devastating natural disasters created the opportunity for a widespread anti missionary anti foreign uprising. This uprising came early in 1900 when several missionaries were killed in Shantung and other provinces in Northern China. The uprising quickly spread throughout China, and more Europeans were killed. With both the implicit and explicit support of Tzu Hsi, the Empress Dowager, this movement was fanned by a Chinese secret society called I Ho Ch’uan (Righteous Harmonious Fists or Boxers). The uprising became known as the Boxer Rebellion. On June 9, 1900, the first Boxer attack on foreign property in Peking occurred. By June 10, it became quite clear that foreigners in the Legation quarter would be the target of Boxer attacks. Regular mail service ended. Austria-Hungarian, French, German, British, Italian, Japanese, Russian and United States nationals congregated and fortified the legation quarter in Peking. And so began the Siege at Peking, a siege that lasted until August 14, 1900. The siege was broken when 18,000 allied troops from the US, Great Britain, France, Germany, Russia and Japan converged on Peking. For about a year, there was an unprecedented alliance

which occurred the eight major military powers against a common enemy, China.

The Boxer Rebellion ended and more concessions were given by China to the victorious military powers. Relative peace was restored, and with it regular mail service.



The US Post Office opened an American Postal Agency in Shanghai, China in 1867. The period after the Boxer Rebellion, however, was inflationary in China and the local currency ultimately reached a point where it was valued at about one-half its US equivalent. On May 24, 1919, the US Post Office addressed this issue by over printing the then current 1917-19 series of definitive stamps. On the low value of the overprinted series, the overprint read SHANGHAI 2c CHINA. These stamps went on sale in Shanghai on July 1, 1919. These overprinted stamps were issued in denominations ranging from 1c through \$1.00 and the surcharge applied was two times original value of the stamp. The stamps were intended to be sold in Shanghai at the surcharged price in local currency. These stamps were valid for prepayment of mail dispatched from the US Postal Agency at Shanghai to addresses in the US. This practice continued until December 22, 1922 when all foreign post offices in China were closed. For a short period of time after these stamps were withdrawn from usage in China, they were available in the US from the main post office in Washington, DC but were not distributed to local postmasters. All told, a total of eighteen face different stamps were issued for "Offices in China" between 1919 and 1922. These very collectable US stamps are listed in the Scott Catalog as K1-K18. Generally, used copies of these stamps are deemed to be more valuable than mint copies, but by all means, give some serious consideration to acquiring any legitimate copies of any of these stamps.